



The Celestials

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In June of 1870, seventy-five Chinese laborers arrived in North Adams, Massachusetts, to work for Calvin Sampson, one of the biggest industrialists in that busy factory town. Except for the foreman, the Chinese didn't speak English. They didn't know they were strikebreakers. The eldest of them was twenty-two.

Combining historical and fictional elements, *The Celestials* beautifully reimagines the story of Sampson's "Chinese experiment" and the effect of the newcomers' threatening and exotic presence on the New England locals. When Sampson's wife, Julia, gives birth to a mixed-race baby, the infant becomes a lightning rod for the novel's conflicts concerning identity, alienation, and exile.

The Celestials Details

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Author : Karen Shepard

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From Reader Review The Celestials for online ebook

Theresa says

This book has been on my list to read since before I even had a Goodreads "to read" list. I finally ran across a copy and jumped at the chance to own this book and read it. I even skipped it ahead of MANY other books in the queue. But... After all that anticipation the book just simply could not perform. I'm so let down! The story while interesting simply went no place special. I felt like it kept kicking a dead horse. I even said it aloud at one instance when the author told me she was going to tell me something, then told me, then told me she had just told me something --which was her writing style. Also within paragraphs she consistently would state the end result then backfill. I found it distracting and irritating to read over 300 pages of it!!

So now why did I give it three stars since the writing style and story development alone probably only warranted what would have been a very generous 2 stars? Because, if I picked through the unneeded blather there were some kernels of a great story. I also loved the setting since I have a soft spot for North Adams, Massachusetts.

~☆~Dœni(ela) ♥ ?? love & semi-colons~☆~ says

Not even a summer day and a margarita could save this book. Meandering through late 19th century America, *The Celestials* doesn't know what it wants to be. There are long passages focused on immigrant labor (nothing new there) and unions; other passages that deal with the trajectory of a marriage, a childless one. I tried to keep an open mind but found my interest waning nonetheless. There's just so much telling here, so little dialogue, sparse character development. I'm not surprised Shepard had a difficult time finding a publisher for this one.

Martin says

Comments based on advanced reader's copy. Evaluation is actually three and a half stars. This book strike me a the sort of book that would make a good "Ophra" book. There are excellent historical multicultural connections based on actual events in which Chinese laborers were used as a source of inexpensive labor/strike breakers in the late 19th century in shoe manufacturing in Western Massachusetts. A key contextual element of the story is the relation of the Chinese workers to the Caucasian population and the results and effects of the relationships. The author also brings in elements of complex love stories too. My subjective sense is that the book may have started out as nonfiction, but evolved into a solid piece of literary historical fiction. Two additional comments, it is a shame that major publishes do not value quality works like this and I'm glad there are imprints like Tin House, that support quality writing and writers. Further, special thanks to our Publishers Group West Account Manager Peg O'Donnell who does an exceptional job promoting works like this and quality independent imprints.

Rana says

Goddammit. What could have been amazing was shoddy and disjointed, at best. The true story of a group of 75 Chinese immigrants brought to a New England town to work as strike-breakers in 1875 sounds fascinating. But the writing was bad, just terribly bad. I couldn't figure out my big problem with the writing

though; I think it was that the author used too many commas (which isn't normally a problem for me) but the halves of the sentences just didn't match up a lot of the time. Too many double negatives, split by a comma, or something.

Got about half-way through and decided that I was merely reading words on a page and not connecting at all with the story so, nope, ain't gonna finish it.

Donia says

Yes, sadly I gave this a one star because it was so poorly written. I adore historical novels; historical fiction and the work that goes into them. I cut a lot of slack for "somewhat poorly written books" if they have merit of some sort which this book did not. I lived in New England much of my life. It is beautiful and its history is rich. What could have been a delightful historical novel/story was turned into the driest, dullest lecture that I've ever been party to. I hate to say this about an author's work but author's should ask themselves, who is your audience? Sure wasn't me.

Alida Hanson says

Sensitive, compelling historical fiction set in North Adams, MA right after the Civil War, when the shoe factories are at their height. Workers are striking for more pay and the shoe factory owner imports Chinese workers to work as scabs. The Chinese men are quickly adopted by the women in town who tutor and befriend them. When the wife of the shoe factory owner gives birth to a baby who is part Chinese, her family, the town, and the Chinese workers are all deeply affected.

This novel is about class, sex and race. I wish it were a touch less subtly, artfully written because I can't envision the teen who would willingly read this from beginning to end. Throughout the novel we are asked to consider some mature feelings and thoughts that most teens won't be able to access—especially around marriage.

Hendi says

I loved the first half of this book. The descriptions of place were beautifully written, and the setup was fascinating both in terms of characters, and in how Shepard utilizes real historical information to ground her story. Since it takes place in North Adams, a town I know very well, it was especially fascinating to read. She lost me in the second half though, as the love story develops and then falls apart, and the story felt less and less believable.

Audrey says

I really enjoyed this book. Julia did not turn out to be worth the love people had for her.

Susan says

This is the story of a group of Chinese workers who were brought to North Adams, MA to replace striking workers. I purchased this book because my daughter is currently living in that area and I wanted to learn some of its history. However, the author failed to interest me much in the characters. I found it difficult to believe that Julia would be able to remain in North Adams, much less in her marriage, after her actions. Some of the chapters started with a recount of events that were happening in the world at the time of the story but I didn't feel this added anything to the book.

Lori says

Very interesting local historical based about Chinese workers in North Adams in late 1800's. The story is captivating by itself but add in the local history made this a fantastic book!

Brigid Keely says

"The Celestials," by Karen Shepard, is the fictionalized account of a very real historical event: the hiring by a East Coast factory owner of a large group of Chinese workers to break up a strike of white employees. Working within the actual events and lives of real people, Shepard provides a fairly solid narration of the unusual events... and does a pretty good job handling the racial tensions and issues of the time, which are different from the racial tensions and issues of our time.

I wanted to like this book, but had a hard time identifying with the characters. Although outlined in broad strokes, they didn't seem to have much depth to them. The Chinese workers are for the most part interchangeable with each other, with Shepard focusing only on Charlie Sing, the foreman, and the man who opposes him. They are also described by both the narrator and white residents as "feminine," "child like," compared to babies and to cows. The Chinese men are frequently described in feminized, emasculating ways. It's true that Asian men, then and now, are often described in such ways (it's a way of rendering them sexless and "safe" while Asian women are fetishized) but it would work better in the text if this attitude/stereotype were remarked upon or shown as wrong/hateful/etc.

Shepherd drops facts about the world outside of the community into the narration in an attempt to ground the book in larger historical context, but they don't really blend with the narration. I wish she'd discussed the Chinese Exclusion Act and its effects more, and the changing ways that white Americans viewed Chinese (and possibly Japanese) immigrants. I also wish she'd gone further into discussing how Alice May Sampson and Charlie Sing related to each other, how the world at large reacted to Charlie Sing's marriage to a white woman, and how their mixed-race children navigated the world. Perhaps that would be outside of the scope of the book?

It also would have been interesting if Shepard had drawn stronger parallels between the efforts of unions, and union busting, then and now. There's a direct line between the way employers treated workers then and now that I wish more writers dealing with the history of labor would delve into.

Interspersed through the text are vintage photographs of Chinese men, both in Chinese and Western dress. It would be nice if the book included an index of the photos (it's hard to flip through the pages and find them, because of the deckled edges of the paper. Nice to look at, difficult to flip through) and especially if there were any kind of biographic or geographic information associated with the photos (although that's often impossible with old photos). There's a pretty long bibliography at the end of the book and several of the sources look really interesting.

"The Celestials" is competently written, but could have used a stronger editor to tighten things up and better integrate the historic factoids. The book left me curious about the personal lives of several people involved in the book. I regret that it didn't "click" for me. This would be a good text for a history class touching on the history of Asians, particularly Chinese, in the USA... a nice counter to the misconception that all AAPI folks are recent immigrants, to the dominant narrative of AAPI life in the USA as recent arrivals. I think this book would work best paired with other books exploring the same themes, though.

Rebecca says

(See my full review, and interview with Karen Shepard, at Bookkaholic.) A photographically precise image of small-town America shaken by the arrival of a group of outsiders. Shepard powerfully evokes a time when assimilation was nearly impossible but genuine traditions were also difficult to sustain. Readers may be reminded of *The Light Between Oceans*, Ann Hood's *The Red Thread*, and perhaps even Alice Sebold's *Lucky* when reading this beautiful, accomplished novel about ostracism and the search for true family and intimacy across cultural boundaries.

Tinky Weisblat says

"The Celestials" is sometimes unclear about the motives of its characters—in part because they don't always understand those motives themselves. It is never unclear about the power of love and forgiveness or the ways in which meeting someone from another culture can begin to liberate a person. And the subject matter is fascinating.

Katherine Hebert says

Initially too disjointed---the author had a hard time incorporating all of her in-depth historical research into a work of fiction, making for rough reading. But in the end, it's worth the read. The eye-opening, historical story based on Chinese boys imported from San Francisco to act as strike-breakers in a shoe factory. In North Adams, MA, of all places.

Laurie Hewett says

Well worth reading. Precise, sensitive writing style. Historical fiction at its best
